

***** WHAT IS PROGRESS?*****

When I recently visited the Buddhapadipa Temple in Wimbledon, there was concern expressed about how progress can be achieved on the Buddhist Path. We need to find out what kind of progress it is that we really want. What is our goal? Is it self who wants progress? Do we really want to understand our lives better?

Someone mentioned that she has some conflict on a Sunday about whether to visit the Temple or not. Sometimes we try to control our lives with the wrong idea of a self who can do so. We forget that the realities in our lives are conditioned and that it is not a matter of changing them, but of understanding them as they are. At moments when one thinks that awareness depends on a certain situation or outer appearance, there cannot be any progress or understanding of the Teachings.

The Buddha often encouraged us to associate with the helpful person, listen and study the Teachings, consider and develop understanding as the right conditions for progress of wisdom. What he taught was not abstract, but what appears in daily life. It is not a matter that we have to be aware, but awareness arises by its own conditions. Who knows about the next moment?

Sometimes we think we have to make a big decision or many big decisions in our lives and that these should be for our progress on the Path. At these moments, if there is awareness of thinking as thinking, a conditioned reality, this is what will be most helpful. When we wonder whether to visit the Temple or go to the cinema, there are bound to be different ideas and it is honest to know that even if we go to the Temple to help or to listen to Dhamma, there are many different useful and useless states of mind. It was mentioned that when we help people, it is not all with generosity and kindness. There may be different moments of disappointment, hoping for some acknowledgement or attitude of conceit in between.

If we see the value of understanding these different truths as they are, rather than wishing they were different, there will be progress naturally whether we visit the Temple or not. If we go for a walk there can be right understanding and awareness of our tendencies which condition seeing, hearing or thinking at different moments. The attachment to sensuous objects can be known as it is and not as we would like it to be.

Each person has a different kind of life and it is important to know our particular tendencies. Life should become easier and not harder with more wisdom. If we find it becomes harder because we are trying for progress without clear comprehension, it shows there is something wrong in our practice. I spoke to someone at the Temple who works in a hospital and who is sometimes very busy. We might think that if we are tired, or in a 'flap' there cannot be any awareness at these times. On the contrary, the Buddha emphasised realities appearing through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind which can be proved at any moment. A moment of awareness is very valuable, however busy we are, or however much dislike there is of the object.

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Usually we would all like to be good and pure and to have sound thoughts. If they are not useful now, or we are full of anger, these states of mind are conditioned already, and a moment of understanding can realise, with detachment, the realities as not belonging to a self. We might think this is fatalistic at first and that we have to do something else. On the contrary, it is practical and realistic.

When progress is just beginning, it is very weak and any understanding is fleeting: There are bound to be conditions for doubt to arise. As long as we want this awareness to go on for a long time, to control our practice, or to go somewhere for fast results, there will be no progress.

In the Udāna, Verses of Uplift, Section V, 5 the Buddha gives an example to show that the Path is gradual:

"Just as, brethren, the mighty ocean deepens and slopes gradually down, hollow after hollow, not plunging by a sudden precipice, - even so, brethren, in this Norm-Discipline the training is gradual, progress is gradual, it goes step by step, there is no sudden penetration of insight."

By realising with patience that there are always more phenomena to be known again and again, increasing understanding can develop. This is the progress which should become the priority in our lives. We will begin to see the value of skilful states of mind, and mindless about becoming enlightened overnight.

We read in the Atthasālini, Expositor, 122, about the characteristic of understanding:

"As when a lamp burns at night in a four-walled house the darkness ceases, light manifests itself, so understanding has illumination as its characteristic. There is no illumination equal to the illumination of understanding....."

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